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Recovering an Archive of Women's Voices: Durga Prasad Nadir's "*Tażkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī*"

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Recovering an Archive of Women's Voices: Durga Prasad Nadir's "*Tażkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī*"

by

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Abstract

Recovering an Archive of Women's Voices: Durga Prasad Nadir's *"Tażkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī"*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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Durga Prasad Nadir's "*Tażkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī*" is the second Urdu *tażkirah* (biographical compendium) to engage with women authors of Urdu and Persian poetry over the ages. The text was published between 1876 and 1884 in Delhi, India, and collates biographical information on women poets from India and Iran along with samples of their poetry. In this report, I argue that Nadir's *tażkirah* is an important appraisal of women's contributions to the arts and sciences that, while presented in a patriarchal and reformist mold, values women above all for their skills and accomplishments. I investigate how Nadir's socio-cultural milieu and his personal, professional, and educational background come to bear on his analysis and treatment of women poets and scholars. Finally, I translate sections in the *tażkirah* devoted to Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (1768-1824), considered the first woman to have authored a *dīvān*, or collection of poetry, in Urdu. I compare Nadir's treatment of Mah Laqa with contemporary analyses to demonstrate how his approach influenced later understandings of the poet within the Urdu tradition.

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A Note on Transliteration

The letters of the Urdu alphabet have been transliterated as given in the table below. Personal names, place names, and names of languages have not been transliterated. Technical terms and concepts have been transliterated at their first occurrence and not thereafter. The names of texts have been transliterated throughout.

alif as: a, i, u, ā

b	*p*	*t*	*ṭ*	*ṡ*
j	*ch*	*ḥ*	*ḳh*	
d	*ḍ*	*ż*		
r	*ṛ*	*z*	*zh*	
s	*sh*	*ṣ*	*ẓ*	
t̲	*z̲*	‘	*ġh*	
f	*q*	*k*	*g*	
l	*m*	*n*		

vā’o as: v, ū, o, au

h *ī*

baṛī ye as: y, e, ai

nūn-e Ġhunnah: ñ *hamzah: ’*

iẓāfat: -e

Introduction

"Taẓkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī" (Nādir's *Taẓkirah* of Women/*Taẓkirah* of Rare Women) written by Durga Prasad "Nadir" (Rare) (1833 – 19??) and first published in parts between 1876 and 1884 in Delhi, is the second ever Urdu *taẓkirah* to be devoted entirely to female poets of Persian and Urdu in the Indian subcontinent and Iran.[1] Written in a time of political upheavals, transformation, and reform, the text has not received adequate attention in literary histories of the Indian subcontinent. Nadir's *tazkirah* represents a strong voice from within the tradition that challenges the male-centered constructions of Urdu literary history, and asserts a space for women in Urdu's formative stages. At a time when Urdu is being solidified and structured as a veritable language of consequence in the subcontinent, Nadir sets up a separate but intersecting canon of women's contributions that ensures their representation in history. In this thesis, I draw attention to the most prominent features of this work as far as their contribution to history and gender is concerned. Nadir's *tazkirah* is an important literary archive and documentation of women's voices that celebrates women's creativity on its own terms. It contributes to the debates surrounding women's education and societal reform in nineteenth-century India, a time when reforming women was considered essential to reforming society. Notwithstanding its contributions to gender and literary history, visible in the text are clear tensions within Nadir's thought. Nadir adopts a somewhat pedantic

[1] Durga Prasad Nadir, *Taẓkirat-ul Nissāy-e Nādrī,* ed. Rafaqat Ali Shahid (Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications, 2016). Except when noted otherwise, all translations in this paper are my own.

attitude towards women, but the text offers ways in which to deconstruct his suggestions and their relevance to the women quoted. While Nadir pays lip service to dominant reformist concerns, his treatment of the women does not adhere to these same standards. He prescribes notions of the ideal woman and the benefits of women's education that are similar to reformist narratives, but simultaneously celebrates values of literary and historical female figures that do not neatly align with these merits. While Nadir seems to buy into certain colonial constructions and approaches, especially in regard to identity differentiation, his writing betrays a disavowal of these same categories. Finally, I compare Nadir's treatment of Mah Laqa Chanda (1768-1824), considered the first woman to have authored an Urdu *dīvān*, a collection of poetry, with those of others in the field. I argue that the text unearths a tradition of analysis of women's literature within the Urdu sphere itself that differs from Western understandings of female authorship in Urdu. From the late nineteenth-century, men such as Nadir were manifestly thinking about the involvement of women in a rejoinder to standard literary canons, as well as evaluating the content and quality of their compositions. This project recovers an important archive with all its problematics, and will give more guidance on how to read women's representation in the history of Urdu literature and gender.

The *Tazkirah* Genre

The word "*tazkirah*" means "mention" or "remembrance," and has come to denote a genre of Persian and Urdu that is viewed as part literary criticism, part history, and part an outline of the material culture of a chosen time period. While *tazkirah* writers themselves give no standard definition of the genre, it can in its most skeletal sense be understood as a biographical compendium of poets and a select few verses of their poetry. As a genre of selection and categorization based on the sensibilities of the compiler, the *tazkirah* tends to give more insight into the values and literary taste (*ẓauq*) of its compiler rather than those of its subjects. "*Lubāb ul-Albāb*," a biographical anthology of Persian poets completed by Sadid al-Din Aufi in Ucch, Sind, in 1221, is widely considered to be the first literary *tazkirah* in Persian. Its style was mimicked by Persian and later Urdu *tazkirah* writers. The first known Urdu *tazkirah*, Mir Muhammad Taqi "Mir's" "*Nikāt al-Shu'arā*," while devoted to Urdu poets, was written in Persian in 1752, demonstrating both the dominance of Persian in the Indian subcontinent as a formal literary language and the influence of Persian literary traditions on the then fledgling Urdu literature canon. Mir's *tazkirah* also reminds us of the interconnectedness of Persian and Urdu in the world of letters, such that knowledge of one language presumed fluency in the other.

Apart from impetus provided by its Persian precedent, the proliferation of *tazkirahs* in the subcontinent is linked to the "*bayāẓ*" and "*guldastah*" traditions.[2] The

[2] Farman Fatehpuri, *Urdu Shu'arā ke Taẓkire aur Taẓkirah Nīgārī*, (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1972), 11, 43.

bayaz tradition has its roots in the understanding that a correlate and prerequisite of composing good poetry is the ability to discern good poetry. Poets were thus in the habit of jotting down verses they encountered in their daily lives that appealed to them in their notebooks, or "*bayaz*." They would add a note on the circumstances and life of the poets whose verses were recorded to create a *tazkirah*. "*Mushā'irahs*" are poetic gatherings, vibrant spaces in which poetry is recited, engaged, critiqued, and ridiculed by those who possessed varying degrees of proficiency in the art. A "*ṭarḥī mushā'irah*" is a particular kind of *mushairah* in which a poet's competence is judged by his ability to compose impromptu verse. A verse pattern is decided on the spot, and poets are expected to display their prowess in constructing metrical verse that outdoes the thoughts, feelings, and tenor of a verse already recited. The verses composed at these mushairas were recorded in "*guldastahs*" that were then published. When information on the poets was added to these "*guldastahs*," another sort of *tazkirah* was born.

Persian *tazkirah*s have been divided into two kinds, general and specific, and this mode of categorization bled into the Urdu tradition.[3] General *tazkirahs* are those that present in alphabetical order or chronological sectioning all poets over the ages. Specific *tazkirahs* focus on the poetry of a particular age, or on poets writing in a certain genre or with a distinct interest. Researchers have also sectioned out Urdu *tazkirahs* into those written in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century respectively, the time when *tazkirah* writing on Urdu poetry in its traditional sense was most prolific.[4] *Tazkirahs* written in the

[3] Fatehpuri, *Urdu Shu'arā*, 22.
[4] Fatehpuri, *Urdu Shu'arā*, 66-68.

eighteenth century tend to be shorter, organized in the same pattern *i.e.*, alphabetically by the *taḳhalluṣ*, or pen-name, of the poet, and more influenced by Persian. These *tazkirahs* also heavily borrow from each other, but do not make overt note of the sources they utilize. In fact, reliance on other *tazkirahs* can only be detected by similarities between *tazkirahs*. In contrast, there is an increasing trend of writing *tazkirahs* in Urdu in the nineteenth-century. The creation of Fort William College at the start of the nineteenth-century and its interest in prose texts in regional languages and *tazkirahs* contributed to the change in their diction and content.[5] Fort William College laid the foundation of Urdu prose such that it spurred authorship and genuine engagement in the genre. Urdu required literary histories to be considered a legitimate linguistic tradition, and this took the form of the *tazkirah*. Nadir's authorship of a *tazkirah* of women poets at this nascent time in Urdu reminds us of the importance of women's narratives not only in the construction of Urdu literary history, but in that of history itself.

Nineteenth-century *tazkirahs* make note of their sources and references that no longer are restricted to information acquired from friends and students, but extend to reliance on newspapers, magazines, ads, and indexes of other books. In addition to the traditional contents of the poets and their poetry, nineteenth-century *tazkirahs* tend to ask larger questions about the trends of Urdu language and literature. Their authors insert their own musings and deliberations on issues such as what language is, when the Urdu language was created, who Urdu's first poets were, and so on. In short, the nineteenth-century *tazkirah* is not only a compendium of poets but a document of a sort of literary

[5] Fatehpuri, *Urdu Shu'arā*, 70.

criticism and history, and a reflection of the socio-cultural notions of the environment it inhabited. By this definition, Nadir's *tazkirah* certainly reflects a standard nineteenth-century *tazkirah*, as will be discussed later. The difference between the eighteenth and nineteenth-century *tazkirahs* is usually ascribed to general increased involvement in the literary milieu with the advent of print technologies and Muslim retreat to the more internal, imaginative world of poetry after their "defeat" and subsequent vilification at the hands of the British after the Mutiny of 1857. At the same time, Persian was being displaced as the official ruling language, giving rise to composition in local languages, especially Urdu.

Like all other works of history, *tazkirahs* can be problematized, and have been criticized both in their time and within modern scholarship for their lack of details, their subjective style, and repetition sometimes inherent in their emulation of other *tazkirahs*.[6] However, *tazkirahs* are a dominant, established genre of literary history in the Islamic tradition. In addition to the information contained within them, they are veritable troves of the dialogues circulating within the author's socio-cultural, poetical milieu. The *tazkirah* makes manifest the tensions, attitudes, and particular literary preferences of poets and their interlocutors, as well as the personal standing of the author within these debates. What is sensed merely through reading poetry is lent credibility when validated by external evidence as given by a *tazkirah*. Moreover, *tazkirahs* set the standard for biographical writing in Urdu such that monologues today mimic the narrative style of *tazkirahs*.

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[6] Fatehpuri, *Urdu Shu'arā*, 77

Tazkirahs are often relied upon as a reference in treatment of Persian and Urdu literature within Western scholarship. Authors of academic texts use *tazkirahs* to verify the biographical details, poetry, or existence of a particular author. "*Āb-e Ḥayāt"* (The Water of Life), composed by Muhammad Hussain "Azad" and published in 1880, is perhaps the best-known Urdu *tazkirah* in Western scholarship on Urdu literature. The text is viewed as the first modern history of Urdu literature and an attempt to preserve the remnants of the classical Urdu poetic culture in the face of British encroachment and permeation into the spheres of education and literature by compiling information from previous *tazkirahs* and the author's own knowledge of the ways of the "elders."[7] While the methodology is no different from that utilized by other *tazkirah* writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Azad's text is unique in its consciousness of the perceived decline and erasure of a collective culture, and his belief in the necessity that it must be recorded. Coupled with this awareness is the desire to reform Urdu literature such that it draws away from the "unnatural" influences of Persian poetry and closer to English literature that represents nature more realistically. Clear in *"Āb-e Ḥayāt"* is the conviction that Urdu poetry, simple when it borrowed from Braj in its early days but made needlessly convoluted and fantastical over time by its emulation of Persian, is in a state of decline that can only be reversed by treating English literature as a guide.

While this survey has treated the conventional definition of the literary historical "*tazkirah*" genre within Urdu and Western scholarship, it can be argued that this is simply one understanding of the term. With "*tazkirah*" as "remembrance," a reference by

[7] Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3-4

an author to other individuals in a manner not mandated by the requirements of the genre can be considered a certain kind of a *tazkirah*. For example, the nineteenth-century North Indian poet Mirza Asadullah Khan "Ghalib" writes in his *maṡnavī* "*Chirāġh-e Dair:"*

> I look for three bodies from among the men of the country
> Who are the color and splendor of this town of gardens
>
> When I wish to measure the beauty of epiphanies
> Over and over, I ask God for "Fazl-e Haq"
>
> When I write the amulet of the arm of faith
> I write "Hussam ul-Din Haidar Khan"
>
> When I patch up the garment of my soul
> I sew "Amin ul-Din Ahmad Khan"[8]

Here, Ghalib directly addresses these three individuals while playing on their names to invoke the name of God, Imam Ali, and Prophet Muhammad respectively. "Fazl-e Haq" is a proper name, but also means "merits of God." "Hussam-ul Din Haidar Khan" is translated as "the sword of religion," and "Haidar" means "lion," both common epithets for Imam Ali, cousin of Prophet Muhammad, the fourth caliph of Islam, and the first Imam of the Shia faith. "Amin" means one who can be safely entrusted with goods and was a nickname for Prophet Muhammad before he was established as a prophet of Islam. "Ahmed" was the first title conferred upon Muhammad from God, and means "most praiseworthy." Ghalib uses this space to commemorate and hierarchize the central figures of the Islamic faith while remembering and memorializing three individuals within his milieu to whom he was closely connected. In its broadest sense, "*tazkirah*" can be

[8] Z. Ansari, *Maṡnaviyāt-e Ghālib (Matn-e Fārsī ma' Urdū Tarjumah)* (New Delhi: Ghalib Institute, 1983), 41.

extended to a literary mention of this sort, and this understanding troubles our notions of established genres and their accepted hermeneutic possibilities. It is necessary to approach archives with a critical eye to the labels of genre, gender, hierarchy, and so on to unearth those narratives that have been suppressed by these categorizations.

While Nadir's *tazkirah* is in its structure very much in the scheme of a standard nineteenth-century *tazkirah*, his unusual subject matter makes us aware of how it is possible to carve a space within the genre for more subaltern narratives. In the following section, I detail particularities of Nadir's life and examine how his personal background, professional involvement, and socio-political environs may have influenced his approach to his *tazkirah* and the subjects contained therein, before moving on to discuss the *tazkirah* itself.

Durga Prasad Nadir and his Milieu

Not much is known about Nadir from sources other than his own writings. Nadir was born "Tej Bhan" into a Kayasth Hindu lineage well-versed in Indo-Persianate literary traditions and closely associated with the British. His great-grandfather Rai Hardai Ram was in the employ of Shamru Begum and granted a pension from her treasury once the British took over her lands after her death.[9] Nadir 's father Munshi Mansa Ram "Natavan" (Incapable) worked for the British for a few years but left on account of the ill-tempered nature of "Davy Sahib."[10] According to the compiler of the *tazkirah*, however, it was Nadir 's father who was in the employ of Shamru Begum and the Awadh government, and was later a British servant in various capacities.[11] Regardless of the exact nature of his employment, Nadir's father wrote poetry, literary tracts in prose and verse, and translated texts between Urdu, Persian, and Hindi. Nadir himself was born on 21 September 1833 in Kucha Brij Mahal in Delhi. He completed his initial schooling at the age of nineteen and then moved on to Mission School located in Chandni Bazaar. Here he also served as an assistant teacher. In 1852, he was admitted to Delhi College and studied Persian, Mathematics, Hindi, Arabic, and English there until 1855. After this,

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[9] According to Nadir, Shamru Begum's real name was Zebunissa Begum and pen-name "Makhfi." She was from an established Muslim family and was ensnared by a Frenchman who converted her to Christianity and married her. Shamru Begum took over his lands after this gentleman died, which included Sardhana in what was then Awadh, now Uttar Pradesh. Nadir, *Tażkirat, 222*. Thomas William Beale's "The Oriental Biographical Dictionary" identifies Shamru as a close supporter of the British and a dancing girl who was first converted to Roman Catholicism by, and married to, an Englishman, Reinhardt. She is said to have died in 1836. Upon her death, she is said to have left more than six lakh rupees to various charitable purposes, including the founding of a college for young men to embark on missionary activity in Tibet and Hindustan. Thomas William Beale, *The Oriental Biographical Dictionary* (Calcutta: J. W. Thomas, Baptist Mission Press, 1881), 251.

[10] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 222.

[11] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 12.

he learnt modes of mathematical inquiry ("*pemā'ish-e taḳhtah*" and "*per o meṭar*") and served as a scribe in the village registrar in Rohtak. During this time, Nadir also learned the art of calligraphy in *Nasta'līq* script from Mirza Abdullah Baig, the student of Mir Panjah Kash.[12] From 1859 to 1863 he taught Persian at a village school in Gurgaon. In 1864, he moved to Branch School in Teliwara, Delhi, and soon after to Normal School, Delhi. He was then brought to Lahore by Pyare Lal "Ashob,"[13] who was close to the Director of the Department of Education in Punjab, Major Fuller.[14] Like Muhammad Husain Azad, Altaf Hussain "Hali," and Maulvi Karimuddin, Nadir was employed in the British government upon Ashob's recommendation. From 1872, he worked as an editor of Mathematics books in the government printing press of the Department of Education, Punjab. In 1875, he was appointed as a Mathematics teacher in the new Delhi College and returned to Delhi in that capacity. He married in February 1877 at the age of 43. In April 1877 Delhi College was abolished and Nadir was forced to return to Lahore and

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[12] Sayyid Muhammad Amir Rizvi (d. 1857), more commonly known as Mir Panjah Kash, was a calligrapher at the court of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. He was among the foremost calligraphers of his time and had a number of pupils. "Note on Mir Panjah-Kash." *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 1, no. 4 (Oct 01, 1953): 337, http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/docview/1301919256?accountid=7118.

[13] Pyare Lal Ashob (1834 - 1914) was closely connected to the British administration and the Hindu community in Delhi. He was well-educated, fluent in English, and served in the school systems. He had a close correspondence with the great Urdu and Persian poet Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan Ghalib (1797-1869), for whom he prepared English communications with officials of the British administration. Daud Rahbar, *Urdu Letters of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 626. "Ashob" is also the author in Urdu of a history of British rule, entitled "*Tārīḳh-e Salṭanat-e Inglīshiyā*" (1871), translator of British legal texts and Sanskrit puranas into Urdu, and editor of geographical and educational texts.

[14] Major Abraham Fuller was seconded out of the army to serve in this capacity. He was appointed in the Royal Artillery Bengal in 1845, made captain in 1858, major in 1865, and drowned in 1867. He had an interest in Arabic and Persian literature, and had translated some medieval Persian chronicles into English. Avril A. Powell, "Scholar Manqué or Mere Munshi? Maulawi Karimu'd-Din's Career in the Anglo-Oriental Education Service," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 220.

work as a Head Examiner. Upon receiving his pension, he resigned from his position and settled in Delhi, where in 1881 he founded a bookstore in Dariba Kalan Bazaar called "Delhi Book Society." Additionally, Nadir served as an agent of the Office of Examination Key, Delhi, General Commission Agent, and caretaker of the magazine "Hindustānī Luġhāt-e Urdū," or "Indian Dictionaries of Urdu." Nadir passed away sometime after 1903. Over the course of his life he had five sons and a daughter. Only his daughter, who was perpetually unwell and widowed early, survived.

By his own count, Nadir wrote over a hundred tracts in his life, of which forty-eight were published, and fifteen are of a literary nature. Given his long association with the education industry, it is of no surprise that most of his compositions are school curriculum books.[15]

From this short introduction, it becomes clear that the dominant influences on Nadir 's life came from his and his family's close ties to the British administration and his own association with Delhi College. Traditionally, Kayasths were known to have served the governments of the Mughals and their successors, aided especially by their literacy in Persian and record-keeping skills.[16] Nadir's lineage very much conforms to this involvement, given his father's service to the British and literary knowledge of and production in Urdu, Hindi, and Persian. The British attitude towards Indians from the nineteenth-century through the 1830s is best defined by the concept of "White Mughals,"

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[15] Except where indicated otherwise in a footnote, this information on Nadir's life is taken from the compiler's introduction to the *tazkirah*. Nadir, *Taẓkirat,* 12-14.

[16] Gail Minault, "The Perils of Cultural Mediation: Master Ram Chandra and Academic Journalism at Delhi College," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 191.

or those British who for the most part integrated themselves into Indian culture and adopted local ways. Members of Nadir 's family worked for Shamru Begum, whose domain over Sardhana is known as a hybrid European-Mughal affair that exemplified the White Mughals.[17]

Delhi College has come to represent the later encounter between the British and Indians, and was much more interested in imparting knowledge to the locals. This was carried out most directly through Urdu translations of English texts in the College that were then to be printed and introduced to local schools. Instruction in both the Oriental and English wings of the College was in Urdu. The College is said to have been secular in that it invited all, regardless of religion and cultural background, to engage in and promote their purpose.[18] Delhi College was at its heyday following institutional reform during the 1840s and 1850s and was shut down in 1857 when the English Principal, J.H. Taylor, was killed, and the college attacked and its books burnt by the mutineers. The college was reopened in 1864 but replaced Urdu with English as the medium of instruction, and was shut down again in 1877.[19] In 1854 it had a total of 333 students, out

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[17] William Dalrymple, "Transculturation, Assimilation, and its Limits: The Rise and Fall of the Delhi White Mughals 1805-1857," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 78.
[18] M. Ikram Chaghatai, "Dr. Aloys Sprenger and the Delhi College," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110.
[19] Mushirul Hasan, "Maulvi Zaka Ullah: Sharif Culture and Colonial Rule," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 279.

of whom only 112 were Muslims.[20] Nadir was present in Delhi College at this time, and saw its golden years as well as the tail end of its second shutdown.

The Indian scholars of the Delhi College are divided into three main groups: those who studied before 1857 and managed to secure their positions as prime movers in Urdu literary and educational culture, those whose upwardly mobile careers were compromised by the Mutiny and who only managed subordinate posts in the education service, and those who were relegated to low-grade positions after the Mutiny such as "textbook hacks" and copyists. Of the first category, Muhammad Husain Azad is a prime example, of the second, Master Ram Chandra and Maulvi Zaka Ullah, and of the third, Maulvi Karimuddin.[21]

Nadir is very much in the tradition of, and contemporary to, products of Delhi College such as Muhammad Husain Azad (1830-1910), Master Ram Chandra (1821-1880), Maulvi Karimuddin (1821-1879), Maulvi Zaka Ullah (1832-1910), and Nazir Ahmed Dehlavi (1830-1912). Azad, who represented within the literary world the struggle between classical Indo-Persian poetics and pressures to adapt to the rising English influence, is said to have studied at the college approximately between 1845 and 1853.[22] Chandra was a Kayasth Mathematics professor in the Oriental section who edited two journals in the subject issued from the College in the 1840s and 1850s,[23] created an uproar when he converted to Christianity in 1852, and wrote articles on the need for

[20] Hasan, "Maulvi Zaka Ullah," 277.
[21] Powell, "Scholar Manqué," 227-228.
[22] C. M. Naim, "Shaikh Imam Bakhsh Sahba'i: Teacher, Scholar, Poet, and Puzzle-master," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 159.
[23] Minault, "Perils," 190.

women's education and rights.[24] Karimuddin studied at the College from 1840 to 1844, worked in translation and publication of texts from the College after that, and edited histories (*tazkirahs*) and authored tracts on women's education.[25] He taught Urdu at Agra Government College from 1848 – 1856, and after the Mutiny of 1857 served in the Punjab education service during which he also produced textbooks on geography, history, and grammar.[26]

Zaka Ullah was also descended from a family who served as teachers for the Mughals and was close to Master Ram Chandra. He taught in Delhi College and Agra College (1855-1869), served as Professor of Vernacular Science and Literature at Allahbad's Muir Central College (1872-1876), headed the Delhi Normal School and was the deputy inspector of schools in Bulandshahar and Moradabad (1869-1872). Zaka Ullah was close to Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and espoused many of his views, including the idea that the Muslims should throw in their lot with the British rather than oppose them. He translated European works of Mathematics into Urdu in the 1870s and published prolifically in the 1890s on moral issues, education, and money management. Zaka Ullah was a keen British subject and documented his loyalty to Queen Victoria in his tract entitled "Victoria Nama." In his history of Hindustan, the first volume of which was

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[24] Christina Oesterheld, "Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 309.
[25] Powell, "Scholar Manqué," 214.
[26] Powell, "Scholar Manqué," 203.

published in 1897, he praises the East India Company for having replaced "a barbaric government with a sophisticated and civilized one."[27]

Nazir Ahmed, who is regarded as Urdu's first novelist, entered Delhi College in 1846 where he gained proficiency in Arabic. He was a close disciple of Master Ram Chandra and edited many of his articles on women's education, the views of which later made their way into Ahmed's didactic stories.[28] After he left Delhi College in 1853, he taught for two years at an elementary school in Punjab. He was then instated as deputy inspector of schools in Kanpur but quit the job and returned to Delhi. After the Mutiny, he served until 1884 in various cities as deputy inspector of schools and deputy collector, and spent his remaining years reading, writing, teaching Arabic, and delivering speeches.[29]

Nadir's educational and professional life followed a similar trajectory as many of these figures. Like all of them, he was directly or indirectly impacted by the Mutiny of 1857. It is highly likely that he operated within the same milieu, a fact that is reflected in the themes of his own writings. In fact, in the introduction to his *tazkirah* he quotes directly from Maulvi Karimuddin's "*Tāriḳh-e Shu'arā-ye 'Arabī*" (A History of Arab Poets) and notes that Karimuddin currently serves as a District Inspector of Schools in Amritsar.[30] Much like Master Ram Chandra, Maulvi Karimuddin, and Nazir Ahmed, Nadir had an interest in the cause of women's education. Nazir Ahmed in particular is

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[27] Hasan, "Maulawi," 294.
[28] Oesterheld, "Deputy Nazir," 309.
[29] Oesterheld, "Deputy Nazir," 311-312.
[30] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 56

considered a member of the Muslim service gentry who responded to the loss of power, changes in patronage, employment, and fortune after the Mutiny of 1857 by devising means of educational and social reform for their class and community to recoup their self-respect and retain their "*sharīf*" (noble) status.[31] This included an increased focus on women's religious and intellectual education in the hope that it would help banish spiritual degeneracy in the zenana that had led to moral and material excess in the men's lives. For men to progress outside the home, women were needed to step up in the home. This has also been viewed as a civilizing mission by Muslim men that mimicked its British counterpart.[32] Nadir's writings betray a fondness for the British that aligns with Maulvi Zaka Ullah's own inclination for the colonial masters. Like Azad, Nadir is remembered in literary history for his *tazkirah* that reflected a certain changing trend in Urdu literary culture and social habits.

Nadir is very much a product of his time, an individual shaped by changing cultural forces and demonstrative of their peculiarities and requirements. What emerges is a multifaceted, dynamic figure struggling to mark his presence and voice in the age. Nadir comes from an administrative background that allied closely with the Mughal model, if not directly, then through the British who emulated it. By virtue of this, he is well-versed in Indo-Islamicate literary and educational traditions. He and his family watched closely British ascendance in North India, first through their service for a "White Mughal" *jāgīr* system, and then through Nadir's own direct interaction with them

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[31] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 55.
[32] Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 56.

through the Delhi College and appointments thereafter. Nadir was in and around Delhi during the Mutiny of 1857, and must have been privy to the formalization of British rule. At the same time, his tenure at the Delhi College and co-participation with its figures, described above, meant that he was exposed to a certain kind of knowledge production. His writing reveals that he was involved with the same socio-cultural problematics as many of the students of the College. The reformist activity of the nineteenth-century, much of it a reaction to changing times, ensured a greater focus on issues of women's education, both within the Hindu and Muslim community. During this age, through tools such as the census, and with the rise of the rhetoric of Hindi for Hindus and Urdu for Muslims, there was an increased realization of difference between the communities.

All of this is reflected in the introductory prose text in Nadir's *tazkirah*. He is attuned to the changing social, structural, cultural tides of the time, which results in a *tazkirah* on women's poetry, a topic hardly indulged in before this and attempted in Urdu only once before. Nadir is embedded within the Indo-Islamicate traditions of knowledge production and literature, which is why he chooses to write a *tazkirah* on female poets in Urdu and Persian. His aim is also to demonstrate the depth of his familiarity with the tradition and cement his positionality within it for posterity. He expects that this includes a space for reflection on education among Hindu women, and is comfortable with developing together understandings of learned Hindu and Muslim women in the past, and their knowledge-based accomplishments. Yet he also recognizes that there is no counterpart to the *tazkirah* in the "Hindu" tradition, a fact that evinces the separation between the two religious communities inherent in his conception. Nadir clearly

addresses a Hindu audience; he is concerned with a lack of education among Hindu women, and wants to challenge mindsets that cause low levels of education among Hindu women, not among Muslims. He almost seems to think that the Muslims have sorted out the matter of female education. Nadir uses this text to declare his loyalty to the British in a manner that involves a degradation of the Muslim rulers who preceded them, a fact that further plays into the identity politics of the time, but may also just be a way in which to receive patronage and recognition from the reigning power.

The complexity of Nadir's character and the contradictions inherent in his thought seep into his prose reflections in the *tazkirah*, and allow the reader to investigate his writing and its assumptions. In the next section, I explore in greater detail these themes in Nadir's introduction to his *tazkirah*, as well as the particularities of his treatment of women.

Tażkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī

The *tazkirah* is divided into two main sections with corresponding introductions and notes. It is written entirely in Urdu with a smattering of Persian and Arabic colloquial expressions and verse throughout its prose. The first section, entitled "*Gulshan-e Nāz*," (The Garden of Coquetry) consists only of Persian women poets, and was first published in 1876 by Matba Fauq Kashi, Delhi. Although the poetry documented within is in Persian, the text of the narrative, including the introduction and the short biographies of the female poets, is in Urdu. The second section, entitled "*Chaman Andāz*" (In the Style of the Garden), was published under the name "*Mirat-ul Khiyālī*" (The Mirror of Imagination) in 1878 by Matba Fauq Kashi and consists of the poetry and short biography of Urdu women poets. Both the Persian and Urdu sections are organized by the first letter of the *takhallus*, or pen-name, of the poet according to the Urdu alphabet. In 1884, the complete *tazkirah* with both Persian and Urdu sections was published under the name "*Tażkirāt ul-Nissāy-e Nādrī*" by Akmal Al-Matabe, Delhi.

Nadir writes this *tazkirah* as a response to Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj's earlier *tazkirah*, the first to focus exclusively on women's poetry in Urdu and Persian. The *tazkirah*, entitled "*Bahāristān-e Nāz*" (The Spring-Garden of Coquetry), was first published in 1863 and with revisions four years later in 1867.[33] According to Nadir, he compared these two versions with the information contained in other *tazkirahs* of Persian and Urdu that refer to women writers. He found discrepancies between Ranj's account and theirs, as well as between the older texts themselves. His aim in writing a *tazkirah* is

[33] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 50

then to present a succinct, accurate narrative that compares and collates information contained in previous texts, and add to it the few female poets in his knowledge.[34] In addition to these *tazkirahs*, Nadir sources his material from his own personal knowledge, accounts of his friends and acquaintances, and newspapers and magazines of the time. This last source reflects the public preoccupation of the age with issues of women's education, and how print technologies of the time made possible circulation of texts on the subject. While it is not uncommon for *tazkirah* writers to point to faults of others in their field, Nadir's emphasis on his research methods, and the thoroughness of his investigation seems to be his unique claim. Nadir makes his methodology clear in a manner unusual for texts of the time. He does pointedly quote Ranj's *tazkirah*, but also includes the previous *tazkirah* writers in his criticisms of extant writing on the genre. Whether or not he is successful in doing so, Nadir desires to set himself apart in his writing method from the shoddier practices of all those who preceded him, not just one author. His rejoinder to Ranj's criticism of his *tazkirah*, included in the appendix, signals his lack of reluctance to participate in more traditional *tazkirah* debates as well.[35]

Nadir opens his *tazkirah* with the following couplet and line:

"Oh noble of the age show us generosity

Open the closed door with the key of generosity

[34] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 50
[35] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 274-280.

Such is God's consummate power that He made man the noblest of all created beings (*ashraf-ul maḳhlūqāt*) and made education and learning a means by which to gain nobility (*sharaf*)."[36]

From the very beginning, we are made aware of Nadir's preoccupation with *sharif*, or noble, status, and his conviction that education is the means by which to attain it. This sets the terms of his reformist agenda. His purported ideological aim in writing the *tazkirah* is to encourage the *sharif* Hindu men of India to educate their women, for this will allow mothers to raise their children better, and to ensure that the good name and standing of India is preserved. According to him, the men of the age keep women uneducated in order to "increase their own honor."[37] *Sharif* Hindu men do educate the widows of the family, but only so that they can read scripture and be near to God in their final years.[38] This practice should be extended to married women so that they better understand how to serve their men, learn the benefits of maintaining their chastity (*'iṣmat*), and remain wary through cognizance of the punishment of sins.[39]

To Nadir it is important that he present a survey of the state of women's education across a broad survey of countries and communities. In addition to Hindu and Muslim women, he manages to slip in a few words on English, Jewish, and Parsi women. He notes that based on his knowledge the latter two are generally educated, but for the former assumes that an uneducated English woman is rare, and that many among them

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[36] Nadir, *Tażkirat*, 45.
[37] Nadir, *Tażkirat*, 45.
[38] Ibid., 45.
[39] Ibid., 46

are poets.[40] Given that his subject is Persian and Urdu and he delineates the geographical scope of his *tazkirah* as the Asian subcontinent, it is not surprising that the women of Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Anatolia, and Central Asia are given mention.[41] What does stand out is his commitment to including China in this count, given that it possesses very little shared linguistic and literary overlaps with the Indian subcontinent. Nadir finds in the *Avadh Aḳhbār* an essay that translates from Chinese into Urdu a section of a guidebook for women, and reproduces a summary of this essay in his text.[42]

The essay advocates demure, submissive female behavior on the part of women from childhood through widowhood. Girls are advised to respect their parents and elder siblings, greet their older relatives every day and night, and forbear from habits for which they are reprimanded. They are encouraged to show interest in reading and writing, but to read the introductions of books first to ensure they are not perusing literature of any romantic bent. It is necessary for them to learn Mathematics, since without it they will be incapacitated in the matter of household expenditure accounting. Above all, they are to be soft-spoken, good-natured, reticent, and not bold, outspoken, or immodest. After marriage, girls should serve their in-laws as they would their parents while at the same time attending to their parents with their husband's permission. They shouldn't look here and there while walking on the road, and must retire to a separate quarter when men

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[40] Ibid., 51.
[41] Ibid., 52.
[42] Nadir, *Taẓkirat,* 119. *Avadh Aḳhbār* was the first Urdu daily newspaper in North India, launched in 1858 from the Nawal Kishore Press in Lucknow.

come to their house. Women should never look at men with longing (*ḥasrat*) or amazement (*ḥairat*), and the woman who never raises her gaze to meet the eyes of men possesses great consciousness. They must never go to temples, laugh loudly, or wear anything more than simple, plain clothes. In widowhood, a woman should become so humble (*ḳhāksār*) that the very sight of her arouses hatred. Just as a young woman should be entirely obedient to her parents and elder brother, and a married woman to her husband, the widow should consider her son the central locus of her existence.

The contents of this essay are extremely similar to guidebooks for women published later in the subcontinent, the most notable and popular of which was Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's "*Bihishtī Zevar*" (Heavenly Ornaments) of 1905.[43] The qualities described in this essay comprise an archetype for the stock ideal woman whom Nadir can hold up as the desired result of reform. This reference also demonstrates Nadir's familiarity with, and execution of, the Prophetic Hadith, "Seek knowledge even unto China." Nadir exemplifies his own adherence to this credo by proving that he personally has made the effort to find a tract from China, that itself recommends education for women and so adheres to the Islamic tradition that refers to it. This circle of validation is important to Nadir, who makes the effort to expand his reach as far as China to give it central positionality in his move to define the ideal woman of the Asian subcontinent. By making these values non-specific to India, Nadir suggests that Indian women's reform is very much within the rubric of broader reform. Indian values are universal, not exceptional. This reinforces the validity of Indian women's reform, but also means that it

[43] The earliest manuscript found dates to 1905. Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 64.

can have a stake in and be responsive to broader movements of women's reform. Nadir's outlook is expansive and differs from the community, custom-oriented approach of reformers like Thanawi.

While Nadir sets out the desired woman in these terms, his own examples of educated women across the age do not conform to these specifications. In the pages that follow, Nadir notes Muslim and Hindu women over the ages who were either well-educated, composed poetry, or both. He takes care to note the husband or father of the women where he can, but is in no way opposed to including women who do not possess these *sharif* markers but contributed significantly to literature or distinguished themselves as scholars. Of these, examples include Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, considered the first woman to have authored a *divan*, or a collection of poetry, in Urdu, and Kargi, who engaged in scholarly debates during the time of Raja Janak, King of Mithila in 4000 BC according to Vedic literature.[44] While Nadir pays lip service to their *sharif* social status as decreed by marriage or birth where possible, he celebrates these women above all for their literary and intellectual accomplishments, and not for conforming to the notion of the "ideal woman" delineated previously in the text. These women are not lauded for being obedient daughters or wives, or for maintaining a modest and reticent disposition. They are distinguished on the basis of the verses they composed, and for the contributions they made to science and the arts.

Examples of women who wrote in Arabic include Zulekha, who composed verse in admiration of the Prophet Yusuf, Umayya, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad's

[44] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 56-57

grandfather Abdul Mutallib, who along with her sisters recited dirges at the moment of their father's death, and Taqiya, who was born in Sur, Oman, in 505H (1111 AD) and wrote odes and verse fragments.[45] Nadir also contextualizes and imputes consequences to verse composition. For example, he mentions Qatila, famous among Arab poets.[46] When her father Nusr bin Haris was captured and executed as a prisoner of war of the Battle of Badr, Qatila recited a few verses. Upon hearing these, Prophet Muhammad remarked that had he listened to her compositions earlier, he would have spared her father.[47] Nadir not only recognizes and praises those women who engaged in the literary sphere, he ascribes potency and impact to their product, such that it had tangible ramifications in its immediate milieu. Women held a powerful tool in their poetry and possessed the ability to influence those around them with their skill.

Nadir ventures into the realm of epic poetry and legend to draw examples of learned Hindu women. He credits Mandodari, wife of King Ravan of Lanka as given in the Ramayana, with having created the game of chess.[48] He metions Roopmati, who was the queen of the King of Malwa, Baz Bahadur, and took her life when Bahadur fled in the face of the Mughal forces of Adham Khan.[49] Her story is immortalized in folk tales that celebrate the couple and their love, along the lines of the similarly ubiquitous Laila-Majnun and Heer-Ranjha narratives. For Nadir, the historical legacy of women is cemented through such figures preserved in literary narratives. While he cites the Muslim

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[45] Ibid., 54-57.
[46] Ibid., 55
[47] Ibid., 55.
[48] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 58
[49] Ibid., 60

women for having composed poetry, in the Hindu section Nadir's female examples are scholars as well. These include Lilavati, the daughter of the great mathematician Bhaskacharya. Lilavati was herself adept in the subject and excelled especially in accounting, as well as Sanghamitra, the daughter of King Ashoka who was a great scholar in her time.[50] Of course, Mira Bai marks her place among these women as daughter of the Marwari raja of Merta and revered poet whose *gīt* and *bhajans* are widely sung in India.[51]

The matter of guidance in the matter of female education sheds light on the way in which Nadir differs from other reformers of the age, particularly Nazir Ahmed. Nadir laments that when an Indian, especially a Hindu man, raises the topic of women's education, his listeners become upset and remain silent, and if they speak, utter this response: "Well, sir! If you begin this practice in your family, then perhaps another will become interested by following your example."[52] His rejoinder to this is a Persian statement of his own composition: "If there is desire in the heart, no guidance is required."[53] This is in direct contrast to someone like Nazir Ahmed, who perpetuated his reformist agenda through instructive novels that clearly defined the qualities of the model of a good, obedient woman that all women should emulate. According to Nazir, women require education, but in limited amounts, and have to be guided towards the optimal manner in which to receive and manifest this instruction in their reformed mannerisms.

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[50] Ibid., 58-59
[51] Ibid., 60
[52] Ibid., 46.
[53] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 46.

Conversely, Nadir is ostensibly rejecting the idea that there needs to be some sort of ideal precedent that women require and a manual by which to reach this. This statement is of course troubled by the Chinese essay that lays out the qualities of the desired woman, for it does indicate a standard Nadir is adhering to. Yet, by invoking examples of women who in no way evince characteristics of this ideal woman, Nadir has already undercut his strict adherence to and even belief in this archetype. Moreover, if we take the examples of women he quotes as "guidance," it is telling that he looks not to tracts written by men dictating how women should behave and be educated, but to other women. If women are to be guided by anyone, it is these women who have distinguished themselves through their own skill and effort.

In fact, the one clear instance in which he details a woman being guided by a man is in his section on religious decrees that sanction female education and poetry-writing by women. Nadir utilizes religious scripture not so much as guidance on how to educate women, but injunctions to educate women at all. He claims the goddesses Parvati and Sita as women knowledgeable in Sanskrit, and asserts that women have been writing in Prakrit and Bhasha (Hindi) since the inception of the languages.[54] Hindu women have been enjoined to seek education in the Vedas: "Obtain complete excellence and goodness and knowledge and well-breeding!"[55] Muslims are instructed by the sharia to educate women, and women of good families are often literate. If nothing else, they have "*Bismillāh*" ceremonies at the age of four years, four months, four days, to mark the

[54] Ibid., 45.
[55] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 48.

child's first encounter with the Quran and to recite its opening words "*bismillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm*" (In the Name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful).[56] He quotes an Arabic hadith, or saying, of Prophet Muhammad: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon all Muslim men (*Muslim*) and Muslim women (*Muslimah*)."[57]

Nadir parses the Islamic tradition to prove whether poetry-writing by women is religiously permissible and sanctioned. To this end, the first example he gives is that of Prophet Muhammad having given *iṣlāh*, or the correction given by a master (*ustād*) to his student (*shagird*), to his young wife Aisha.[58] This is the only instance in which a man is directly noted as having guided a woman. One day, Aisha comes back home from a visit to her relatives. Prophet Muhammad asks her what present she has brought for him, and when Aisha says she composed a couplet for him at her relative's place, he commands her to recite it. Upon hearing the couplet, Muhammad suggests an adjustment to the second verse, and gives her his own preferred version of the verse. Muhammad does not question the verse but seeks to correct and enhance it, and in doing so validates Aisha's participation in poetry composition. Within Nadir's scheme, the most revered and exalted human figure in Islam is the only one endowed with the authority to guide a woman.

The means of justification for the permissibility of female authorship Nadir utilizes further proves the depth of his familiarity with the Islamic tradition. His next example is that Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and the wife of his cousin and fourth

[56] Ibid., 47.
[57] Ibid., 45.
[58] Ibid., 48-49.

caliph of Islam, Ali, who composed a *marśiyah* (elegy) upon the death of the Prophet.[59] Finally, he states that the wife of the Abbasid caliph Harun ar-Rashid, Khadija, also named Zubaida, was an adept poet. What is important in these examples is that Nadir covers the dominant factions within Islam. Muhammad is considered the Seal of Prophethood during whose time Islam was perfected, and to whom the irrefutable word of God, the Quran, was revealed. Aisha is important to Sunnis, especially because of her status as the favorite wife of the Prophet and as the daughter of the first caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr, but not as respected within the Shia tradition. Yet, Nadir next invokes Fatima, who is revered by all in Islam, regardless of creed and faction. Fatima is considered the ideal daughter, wife, and mother, who epitomizes the desired values in these roles. Finally, he draws this poetic lineage out to a caliph associated with the golden age of Islam after the death of the Prophet. Nadir selects the most respected female figures in Islam to verify the permissibility of female authorship and secures an exalted lineage of its tradition.

While Nadir demonstrates his acceptance of certain colonial categories, his text belies his complete conviction in these. He laments the decline in women's education over time, such that a phenomenon that seemed so prevalent throughout history has faltered in the current age. Here Nadir declares his loyalty to the British government and his disapproval of the Muslim rulers who preceded it. He buys into the colonial construction of Muslims as barbaric invaders who subjugated the local Hindu population

[59] Nadir, *Tażkirat*, 49. *Marsiya* is a term usually ascribed to dirges lamenting the Battle of Karbala where Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, was martyred in the fight against the tyrant, Yazid.

to their uncivilized ways. According to him, these examples of educated Hindu and Muslim women in the past prove that it was only when the Muslims gained ascendancy over the country that the Hindus began keeping their women uneducated.[60] Since the establishment of the exalted government of the British led by their esteemed Queen Victoria, peace and contentment have spread across the land, and schools for women have popped up and *panḍitnīs* and *bāis* appointed as teachers.[61] A few pages later, he takes this one step further and states that India in the time of Hindu reign was progressive, but the attacks of the Muslims annihilated this trend.[62] When the East India Company took over, education for women started, and after the Mutiny of 1857, when Queen Victoria took control over the country, this practice picked up greater speed.[63] Nadir goes on to say that he would have liked to write a history of the British takeover of India including the coronation of Queen Victoria that was convened by Viceroy Lord Lytton in 1877, to indicate his reverence for the ruling power.[64]

Yet, many of the examples of educated Hindu and Muslim women he lists overlap with the time period of the Muslim rulers, contradicting his claim that Muslim takeover in the land stifled women's education. Nadir's proof that Muslims are allowed and even encouraged to seek education through their scripture and guiding religious figures such as the Prophet and his companions contravenes the basis of his contention that Muslims devalued and prohibited learning during their political hegemony over India. The fact that

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[60] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 63-64.
[61] Ibid., 64.
[62] Ibid., 121.
[63] Ibid., 121.
[64] Ibid., 121.

he is able to list so many examples of women who were literate and composed poetry before British rule undercuts his belief that they were the ones to revitalize interest in women's education. His examples demonstrate that women's contribution to the arts and sciences did not just begin in the nineteenth-century but had a long history in the subcontinent. It is clear that Nadir is aware of and paying lip-service to British socio-cultural beliefs that serviced their own political ascendancy in the subcontinent, but at the same time his text reveals the fissures in his unflinching support of these beliefs.

Nadir seems to pander to the Hindu-Muslim divide by making concerted efforts to section out and pointedly refer to Hindus and Muslims separately in his text. He links Sanskrit with Hindus and, by association but not overtly, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu with Muslims. He states that because the focus of his *tazkirah* is Persian, which derives from Arabic, and Urdu, which is the "child" of Persian, he will first give examples of women poets before the advent of Islam and contemporaneous with the Prophet.[65] If he were following a chronological order, he would have started off with the "Sanskrit *vāliyān*," the ones of Sanskrit. It is for this reason that he mentions Hindu women first in the preface.[66] Plus, education among Hindu women is uncommon, and so he has placed them earlier so that Nadir's "Hindu brothers" can benefit from the *tazkirah* more.[67] He decries the fact that there are no counterparts to *tazkirahs* within the Hindu tradition that would document female poets of Sanskrit and Hindi.[68] For Nadir, then, there is a clear

[65] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 49.
[66] Ibid., 49.
[67] Ibid., 49.
[68] Ibid., 57.

burgeoning awareness of Sanskrit and Bhasha (Hindi) for Hindus and Perso-Arabic traditions for Muslims, as well as an audience he is referring to by its religious and cultural identity markers.

Yet, his inclusion and discussion of both "communities" in the same space reveals his lack of strict adherence to these same distinctions. Within a text of a genre very much in the Islamicate literary tradition he views an opportunity for equal treatment of both Hindus and Muslim communities and literary traditions. It doesn't seem anomalous to him to look for examples of Hindu women who authored poetry in Persian or Urdu as a marker of their educated status. He does not demarcate one particular kind of learning for a specific community. Nadir does not differentiate between a "Hindu" curriculum for Hindu women and a "Muslim" one for Muslim women. He laments equally the loss of the existence in his day of women such as one Khatri woman who lived in Aligarh before the Mutiny and was so well-versed in Persian that she could do her household accounting and letter writing in the language, and a woman who lived during the Mughal Emperor Akbar's age and was acquainted with both Sanskrit and Bhasha (Hindi).[69] To him, it is a shame that among the Persian, Arabic, and Urdu *tazkirahs* that document women poets over the ages, there is only mention of one Hindu woman who composed poetry.[70] Yet, he is hopeful that this one example points to the possibility of more Hindu women who wrote, but were simply not documented. Again, this displays his belief in the fluidity in the people that participate in these genres, that are themselves malleable. Of note is also

[69] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 46, 48.
[70] Ibid., 47.

the matter of fact way in which he approaches women's contributions to the arts. He takes for granted that women must have engaged in these traditions, and this involvement is seen neither as a curiosity nor an exception.

It is here that we can view Nadir's contribution to the discussions circulating around women, their role in society, and their literary and intellectual engagement in nineteenth-century India. Nadir represents a discourse within the Urdu tradition that, amidst all its contradictions, celebrates women above all for their contributions to literature, arts, and sciences. He panders to reformist and colonial concerns and narratives, but in his treatment of women values them for their skill, knowledge, and literary and scholarly accomplishments. He does not look for instances of women who were known for being obedient and "good" wives, daughters, and mothers, but invokes examples of women who excelled in some pursuit of literature and science. This reflects trends within the standard Urdu literature canon of nineteenth-century India in which women and their lives were appreciated on their own terms. In the following pages, I will focus on Nadir's treatment of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda in the *tazkirah*, known as the first woman to compose a *divan*, or collection of poetry, in Urdu, to explore how his approach to her shapes contemporary analyses of the poet. I examine how Nadir's discourse created opportunities and paved the way for understandings of Mah Laqa's personality and work in Urdu literary criticism, and how this differs from writings in the Western academy on Mah Laqa.

Mah Laqa Bai Chanda and her Interlocutors

Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (1768-1824) stands apart from most women in premodern India in that we have an unusual amount of information available on her. Her allure lies in her composition of poetry, her status as a courtesan of great wealth and social standing in Hyderabad, and the structures she had built such as her tomb and mausoleum, which remain as lasting memorials to her today. Mah Laqa herself commissioned the earliest known history of her life, Munshi Ghulam Hussain Khan Bedari "Johar's" "*Māh Nāmah*," (The Story of the Moon) written in Persian in 1813/1814, and translated into Urdu and expanded as "*Ḥayāt-e Māh Laqā*" (The Life of Mah Laqa) by Maulvi Ghulam Sadmani "Gohar" in 1894.[71] In between these sources, Mah Laqa gained mention in *tazkirahs* such as Maulvi Karimuddin's "*Ṯabaqāt ul-Shu'arā-e Hind*" (Levels of the Poets of India) (1847), Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj's "*Bahāristān-e Nāz*" (The Spring-Garden of Coquetry) (1863), Abul Qasim Muhtasham's "*Aḵhtar-e Tābān*" (Luminous Star) (1881), and Nadir's *tazkirah*, discussed here. Modern accounts of Mah Laqa's life followed a few decades later, such as in Samina Shawkat's "*Mah Laqā*" of 1959, Shafqat Rizvi's "*Dīvān-e Māh Laqā Bāi Chandā*" (The Divan of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda) of 1990, and Rahat Azmi's "*Māh Laqā – Ḥālāt-e Zindagī ma' Dīvān*" (Mah Laqa - Conditions of Life and Divan) of 1998. The 2012 edition of the monthly journal "*Sabras*" is devoted entirely to Mah Laqa, and contains feminist analyses of her persona and poetry. While most of these sources were published in Hyderabad, the *tazkirahs* and Shafqat Rizvi's

[71] Rahat Sultana, "Mah Laqā Bā'ī Chandā: Urdu kī Pehlī Nisā'ī Āvāz," *Sabras* 74, no. 9 (September 2012), 24; Scott Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon: Gender, Eros, and Ecstasy in Urdu Poetry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 193.

book are products of the North Indian region, indicating Mah Laqa's prominence in regional narratives and beyond. Scott Kugle's *When Sun Meets Moon* collates information from her physical relics along with secondary literature in Urdu and Persian to become the first book-length project on Mah Laqa in English.

Nadir's *tazkirah* stands somewhere between the first and second tracts to be devoted entirely to Mah Laqa. While it is not yet known if Nadir had access to the first of these, the "*Māh Nāmah*" of 1813/14, he himself attests to his recourse to Maulvi Karimuddin, Muhtasham, and Ranj's *tazkirahs*. Later scholars who wrote on Mah Laqa had access to these *tazkirahs*, as evidenced by references in their work.[72] In line with his treatment of women in the introduction of his *tazkirah*, Nadir celebrates Mah Laqa for her literary composition, skills, and merits. Here, I will not attempt a survey of all writings on Mah Laqa, but home in on a few select compositions. I translate Nadir's entries on Mah Laqa in the *tazkirah*, and note the subtleties in his treatment of Mah Laqa and his commitment to documenting certain marginalized traditions in Urdu literature. In this section, I compare Nadir's portrayal of Mah Laqa with that of Rahat Sultana in her article in "*Sabras,"* and argue that the similarities in their treatment indicate to us how appraisals such as Nadir's made possible certain manners of literary engagement with Mah Laqa within the Urdu tradition. This becomes especially apparent when compared to someone like Scott Kugle, whose work does not treat these same *tazkirahs* seriously.

[72] Naseem Uddin Farees compiles a thorough list of known writings on Mah Laqa, that includes these sources. Naseem Uddin Farees, "Māh Laqā Chandā: Tasāmaḥāt, Tauzīḥāt aur Kitābiyāt," *Sabras* 74, no. 9 (September 2012), 21-23. Scott Kugle cites Ranj and Nadir's *tazkirahs*.

Chanda is first given mention in the *tazkirah* in the introduction, as has been noted above. Nadir states:

"Chanda: But yes, the research is that among women, the first to compose a *divan* in the Urdu language is Chanda, the Deccani prostitute. Look! Such is God's glory that even among men the first to compose a divan is Wali Dakhni."[73]

Chanda is distinguished first for her composition of a divan, indicating Nadir's predilection to valuing, above all, the literary merits of women. Her status as a prostitute is stated very matter of factly and is almost incidental. Whereas Nadir encourages education as a means of gaining *sharafat* in the beginning of the introduction to his *tazkirah*, he is not opposed to celebrating women who are clearly educated but have not become *sharif* through this literacy. Here again we have proof that the qualities he values in women do not align with those of the "ideal reformed woman" he sets out in his introduction. What next holds importance is Chanda's position as relates to larger trends of authorship in Urdu. Nadir holds Chanda up as a counter to Wali Deccani, viewing her within the larger rubric of Urdu literature and as a parallel to renowned, established figures within the standard literary canon. While today, the first divan in Urdu is attributed to Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1580-1611), the fifth sultan of the Golkonda dynasty and founder of the city of Hyderabad, Wali Deccani (1667-1707) is widely known as the "Father" of Urdu poetry.[74] He hailed from the Deccan, and the circulation of his Urdu divan in Delhi is said to have prompted the composition of poetry in Urdu

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[73] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 57

[74] Annemarie Schimmel, *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 153.

rather than in Persian, as was custom, in North India, giving rise ultimately to great poets like Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda (1713-1781) and Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir (1723-1810). While Urdu language and literature came to be associated with North India, it possessed a rich literary heritage in the Deccan that Nadir takes care to emphasize. Nadir places Mah Laqa on the same level as Wali, viewing her composition of a divan in Urdu as a step akin to Wali's establishment of a new poetic tradition. This continues in his survey of Mah Laqa in "*Chaman Andāz*," the Urdu section of the *tazkirah*, in which she receives two separate entries. The first is as follows:

"Chanda Deccani's situation is written thus, this is related in the matter of the very first poetess to compose a divan in the Urdu language:

(Such is God's power, this is also a rare exposition, a place for warning, a station of honor for those of Delhi. All know this fact, all from the low to the high acknowledge that the mixed (*reḳhtah*) language Urdu is the special heritage of those of Delhi. This saying is current among the common and the elite, because the origin and outlet of this language is Urdu bazaar, located in the city of Shahjahanabad (Delhi), from the speech of which everyone's heart is delighted. Except one has to remember, the words of Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Hindi were to some extent mixed together and spoken before the construction of this city by the armies of the kings of Islam, especially during the abode of the caliphs, who often stayed in the vicinity of this miraculous city. For example, Kilu Khari, Tughlaqabad, etc. So, this slave in his *tazkirah* of Deccani poets named *Guldastah-e Nādir ul-Aẓkār* (Bouquet of Rare Mentions), in which apart from the *tazkirah* he has recorded clearly in Urdu the rules of the different sciences pertaining to

poetry with examples, has proved well that the inventor of many genres of Urdu poetry is Amir Khusro Dehlavi, but he has not composed a *divan* in that language, in fact the first builder of that house Wali Deccani, was born in the time of King Alamgir. In the same manner, it is established from the *tazkirah* of Hakim Qasim[75] that among women this woman was the first to assemble a divan.

Although before her some were quicker than her in composing poetry, yet, they did not compose a divan. Additionally, if Wali Deccani, renowned and famous author of Urdu poetry, was present in the time of Alamgir I, then Chanda the Deccani prostitute also gained the honor of being called the first among women to compose a divan during the age of Alamgir II, that is in this art, the talk of which was universal (*'ālamgīr*), it was born in the age of Alamgir.

A joke: How the endless glory of God, eminent in His majesty, is epiphany-creating in this discourse that the amount of difference that Absolute Creator kept in the creation of man and woman, he has showed its epiphany here too. Wali, who was a man, was born in the ruling age of that emperor who in reality was universal (*alamgir*), and made Chanda, who was a woman, manifest at that time that was merely universal (*alamgir*) in name. In short, at this occasion too the difference between masculine and feminine was maintained.)"[76]

Nadir takes care to cement the centrality of Delhi in the development of the language, but also to cede the honor of the first divan in Urdu to Wali Deccani. As a

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[75] Abul Qasim Muhtashem, who wrote the *tazkirah* "*Aḳhtar-e Tabān*."
[76] Nadir, *Taẓkirat,* 139

quick summary, modern histories of Urdu tell us that Urdu developed from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries in the Delhi area as a local dialect of *khaṛī bolī* influenced by Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Amir Khusro Dehlavi (1253-1325), whom Nadir mentions here, is credited with having mixed Persian and Hindavi, another name for Urdu, in verse to create *rekhtah*. Muslim Turkic and Afghan rulers carried it down to the Deccan, where the dialect of Deccani flourished from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, when it was brought back up to Delhi by Wali Dakhni.[77] Nadir identifies Urdu with Delhi, lauding it as its "special heritage," displaying the sort of regional hierarchy and superiority Delhi and Lucknow came to inhabit in North Indian imaginations of Urdu. Yet, he inserts Wali as a seminal figure in this narrative, firmly instating him as the first to have composed a *divan* in Urdu. Within hegemonic understandings of Urdu in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century as the progeny and product of North India, Nadir makes sure to acknowledge the rich legacy of Urdu in the Deccan. While Amir Khusro may have taken the first step in mixing the local Hindavi with Persian literary and linguistic constructions, Wali is the one who took this tradition to its furthest heights by composing a *divan*. Nadir refers here to his own *tazkirah* devoted to poets in the Deccan as well, showing the depth of his engagement with the tradition and reminding us of its importance.

Similarly, Nadir plays with the word *alamgir*, or "universal," to tease out the differences between Wali and Mah Laqa, framing this comparison as a joke. He says Wali was born in the age of the sixth and last powerful Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb

[77] Schimmel, *Classical Urdu*, 127-153.

(1618-1707), who was also known as "Alamgir" as the Mughal Empire was at its greatest expanse during his time. Conversely, Mah Laqa was born and lived during the age of Alamgir II, emperor during the period of Mughal decline, and known for attempting to emulate the recentralization policies of Aurangzeb. Alamgir II is viewed as a derivative of the original, both in name and constitution. Nadir hierarchizes man and woman, intimating that one is merely an offshoot of the other and that Chanda is a lesser contemporary of Wali. Yet, this "joke" lays bare the weakness of male chauvinist narratives that utilize such flimsy comparisons to belittle females, and can even be viewed as a satire of a sort. Nadir doesn't compare directly the divans of Chanda and Wali to prove that one is superior to the other but resorts to such flippant, inconsequential differences to contrast them. In fact, the very act of composing a divan prefigures Chanda's placement on equal playing ground with Wali. While Nadir may be trying to find differences that hierarchize them, he still sets them in parallel conversation with each other. This is reinforced by his statement later on in the entry, wherein he depicts Mah Laqa as placed in the same saddle as, and sharing the reigns with, Wali, again through her composition of a *divan*. The entry continues as follows:

"Hakim Sahib states that this pleasant-bodied dancer, named Mah Laqa, of Hyderabad, was a prostitute (*'aurat-e bāzārī*) and was considered very wealthy. Close to 500 men, soldiers etc., were her servants, often poets scattered praise of her, and why wouldn't they for those who adorned her with praise, would fill their skirts of desire with appropriate reward. She was extremely fond of exercise and wrestling, had great taste for horse-riding. She would mount the horse and consolidate her position such that she would

reduce to great straits good riders in the racecourse, she would outperform knights, she had no equal in the field of archery. In short, this poetess combined in herself all manifest perfections, she was the spring of external virtues. She composed a *divan* under the discipleship of Sher Muhammad Khan, pen name "Iman," she shared the reins with Wali, so to speak.

I who know nothing have found out from the name of her *ustad* that this poetess was present at the time of Arastu Jah, provincial governor of the Deccan province and that was the age of Alamgir II.

It was discovered from "*Ṭabaqāt ul-Shu'arā*" (Levels of Poets) that in the year 1799 this unique one of the age gave her divan as a gift offering to a dignified gentleman, British official of an excellent family, that was kept in the library of the East India Company currently in the city of London, but alas! That of her work only this one verse was seen in most *tazkirahs*, and nothing else came to hand. From "*Aḳhtar-e Tābān*" (Luminous Star) it was made apparent that Chanda was her name and Mah Laqa her pen-name. After her death, her prostitutes divided amongst themselves several maunds of gold and silver and many gems, and this woman also wrote poetry in Persian:

The world may be acquainted with my morals
But you may have an incorrect notion still"[78]

Here, Nadir's account of Mah Laqa is almost hagiographic. She is depicted as exceedingly wealthy, such that she commands both men and women of all classes – soldiers, poets, prostitutes. In the physical arts, she not only competes with but outdoes

[78] Nadir, *Taẓkirat,* 140-141

the best in the field, no matter the sport. The fact that she composed a divan is important, but also that she was in a powerful enough position to interact with the British and present it as a gift of some worth to them. Nadir's analysis of Mah Laqa seems almost like a short summation of later analyses of Mah Laqa, in which the same virtues are presented in an amplified manner. In particular, Rahat Sultana's article on Mah Laqa describes her in more detail as an accomplished poet, a wealthy patron of the arts and sciences whose riches include land, gold, silver, and jewels.[79] Mah Laqa is depicted as a capable horse-rider, skilled in the arts of battle, and a charming figure who inspired those within her milieu to craft praise poetry of her. In Nadir's analysis, Mah Laqa's status as a dancing girl is stated as fact that has no particular negative or positive bearing on the construction of her personality. Similarly, Sultana takes for granted Mah Laqa's profession and focuses instead on extolling her many virtues.

Nadir and Sultana also align in the manner in which they regard Mah Laqa *vis a vis* the men in her milieu. In her article, Sultana places Mah Laqa in conversation with the most powerful men of the time. Mah Laqa rides in battle with Asif Jah II, Nizam of Hyderabad from 1762 to 1803, and her contemporaries in poetry are renowned male poets of the Deccan and North India, such as Raja Chandu Lal Shadan and Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir. Sikandar Jah, the Nizam of Hyderabad from 1803 to 1829, is quoted as having said "finding another with the same perfections as Mah Laqa is difficult."[80] Important men of the age do fall in love with her, and this is due not only to

[79] Sultana, "Mah Laqā," 24-32.
[80] Sultana, "Mah Laqā," 26.

her beauty and coquetry, but also to her intelligence and quick-wittedness that allow her to spar with them on equal terms. Nadir portrays Mah Laqa's interaction with men similarly. In the second entry on Mah Laqa in "*Chaman Andāz,*" he states:

"Mah Laqa: A prostitute, courtesan from among the servants of Raja Chandu Lal Sahib deceased Khatri Prime Minister of Hyderabad Deccan, named Mah Laqa, composed a divan. [I say, this is the same Chanda who has been written about earlier].

One day in the morning Raja Sahib addressed her and stated:

"There has been no peace since the day my eyes met hers
Tell me Astrologer! When is the hour of our meeting?"

That mischievous-eyed, bold, quick-witted one immediately composed this impromptu verse and said:

"Don't bother my heart with your premature crowing!
Oh rooster! Be quiet! For the night is long!"[81]

Mah Laqa, while described as a servant of Raja Chandu Lal, is portrayed as negotiating with him on his own terms. She is sharp, witty, and skilled in verse composition such that not only has she composed a divan, but can also produce extempore verse as per the requirements of the situation. This analysis differs from that of someone like Scott Kugle, who views Mah Laqa as a sort of temptress who seduced men of power, and was in turn used by them for their political machinations.[82] According to Kugle, Mah Laqa molded herself into the object of male desire and pandered to their

[81] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 190.
[82] Kugle, *Sun*, 176.

affections in order to accrue wealth, social status, and prominence.[83] Kugle's account differs vastly from those of Nadir and Sultana, who envision Mah Laqa not as a social climber feigning subservience and devotion to get ahead, but as a woman of substance and worth of her own who engaged with men on equal terms.

Kugle goes on to state that Mah Laqa, while using her wiles to enchant the men around her, channeled her ultimate love for men into Ali, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad, the fourth caliph of Islam, and the first of the Shia Twelve Imams.[84] This is based on the evidence that Mah Laqa is Shia herself, and invokes Ali in the last couplet of many of her *ghazals*. Sultana notes Mah Laqa's predilection to refer to Ali but does not understand it as a literary aberration or special indicator of any displacement of worldly love. She views it within the tradition of others such as Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1580-1611) and Abdullah Qutb Shah (1625-1672), who also expressed their faith in Prophet Muhammad and Ali in the closing couplet of their *ghazals*.[85] Nadir does not offer his opinion on this trend, but this can be attributed to his lack of access to the full divan of Mah Laqa. Yet, this example, as well as the similarities between Nadir and Sultana's accounts, makes clear that Sultana draws from within the tradition to understand Mah Laqa. This points to the importance of narratives such as Nadir's that indirectly influenced the modes of literary criticism and treatment of female figures that came after, but that someone like Kugle overlooks. Kugle cites Nadir's *tazkirah* as a

[83] Ibid., 214.
[84] Ibid., 252.
[85] Sultana, "Mah Laqā," 27

reference within his work, but considers it an incomplete analysis of Mah Laqa that does not investigate adequately the poet and her persona.[86]

Finally, Nadir mentions Mah Laqa and quotes some of her verses in the Persian section of his *tazkirah*, "*Gulshan-e Nāz*." He does not expand on details of her life in this entry, but redirects the reader to the Urdu section of his *tazkirah*. This indicates that, apart from the poetry, there is nothing that can be said in the Persian entry that has not already been noted in the Urdu, such that the two records complement each other. This section reinforces what has already been said about Mah Laqa – she is a skilled poet in both Persian and Urdu, and these are some verses that prove it. Even in this extremely terse biographical section, Nadir takes care to note her status as the first woman to compose a *divan* in Urdu. He cements Mah Laqa's positionality throughout his *tazkirah*, no matter what section is turned to, in this capacity. The one essential characteristic any reader must take away from Mah Laqa's life is her literary accomplishment.

"Mah – Mah Laqa: Mah or Mah Laqa, whom I have noted by the pen-name (*takhallus)* Chanda in *Chaman Andāz* as the first among women to compose a *divan* in Urdu. She scattered pearls in the Persian language thus:

The weight of the smile makes heavy the ruby of the beloved

For its delicacy that lip cannot bear the redness of *pān*

Verse Fragment:

On the Day of Resurrection, Oh God, when my register of deeds

They will open, for on that day I desire its opening

[86] Kugle, *Sun*, 143-145.

Compare it with my destiny inscribed from the beginning of time

If there is a difference in the two, the fault is my own"[87]

[87] Nadir, *Tażkirat,* 113

Conclusion

This work is an initial foray into an under-explored realm within Urdu literature, *i.e.*, the question of how women were represented in texts authored in nineteenth-century India and beyond. Durga Prasad Nadir is a fascinating figure who undertook this charge in a dramatically changing India, a time when an evolving political status quo and reform movements were challenging existing notions of gender, religion, hierarchy, social identity, and so on. His *tazkirah* is a product of this dynamic environment, and reflects the contradictions that emerged as a by-product of operating in this milieu. Nadir's text is an important intervention at a time when Urdu was being constructed and cemented as a legitimate language with its own legacy and standing, in which process *tazkirahs* played an important role as literary histories. It creates a space for women in the Urdu literary and historical canon in its formative stages, but in an autonomous manner. Women are allotted not a minor role in a *takzirah* focused mainly on men, but discussed in their own capacity in a text that can stand both as a complement and rejoinder to male-centered histories. Despite his prescriptivist tendencies, Nadir celebrates these women above all for their contributions, and not for their adherence to standards of the ideal wife, mother, or daughter. This text proves that from the earliest days of Urdu, women and their work were being evaluated and documented in a manner parallel to that of men, and these analyses influenced later understandings of the same. By their definition and structure, *tazkirahs* reflect the views and literary taste of their compilers perhaps as much as of those of their subjects. As such, this study has been as much a focus on Nadir as the women he discusses within the text. Nadir's voice is omnipresent throughout the work,

but itself gives us ways in which to deconstruct his approach. In my reading, the stories and contributions of the women represented within emerge as the strongest voices in the narrative, despite Nadir's occasional attempts to undermine them. My approach to the text gives us a way in which to redeem women's voices even when they may be filtered through a patriarchal lens.

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